

U.S. Misjudged Plans Of Russia in Mideast

First of two articles

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The Nixon administration suddenly escalated its warnings about the risk of a Middle East "collision" with the Soviet Union to try to correct miscalculations on both sides, authoritative U.S. sources contend.

American strategists concede they miscalculated the extent to which the Soviet Union would risk direct military involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Also admittedly misjudged were the risks the Soviet Union would take in exploiting general turmoil in the Middle East.

U.S. planners now say their intelligence reports confirm that in January the Soviet Union made—and disguised—its fundamental decision to put Soviet pilots and Soviet-manned missiles into Egypt's aerial defenses.

This means, these sources now assert, that the Soviet Union, in effect, "crossed the Rubicon" on its Egyptian involvement while urging the United States to restrain Israel. What the United States now sees as this critical decision-in-principle, apparently made during an unannounced visit to Moscow by Egyptian President Nasser, began to unfold in fact in the succeeding months.

In a Jan. 31 letter to President Nixon, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin wrote that deep bombing penetration of Egyptian territory by Israel would force the Soviet Union "to see to it that the Arab states have means at their disposal" for "a due rebuttal to the arrogant aggressor."

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But by then the Soviet Union already had taken the basic, bold decision, U.S. officials now contend. President Nixon, in a quick low-keyed response, said the United States would continue to work constructively for a peaceful solution, including a limitation on arms shipped into the area. In effect, this meant that the United States deferred a decision on an Israeli request for more planes.

Some time in March, these sources continue, the United States did learn of the secret January decision in Moscow for direct Soviet participation in the air defense of Egypt.

What U.S. strategists could not believe at that time, however, was that the Russians would go so far as to put their own planes and pilots into the air over Egypt, in what amounts to a direct combat-support operation.

As reports piled up about extensive introduction into Egypt of Soviet surface-to-air missiles and Soviet pilots and technicians, the prevailing judgment inside the Nixon administration was

that, at most, the Russian pilots would fulfill an advisory or training function, it is said.

On March 23, Secretary of State William P. Rogers announced that Israel's urgent request for Phantom and Skyhawk jets was being held "in abeyance." The United States was continuing to pursue a "low key" policy of restraint.

Israel was dismayed. It protested to the United States that the air superiority needed for its survival in a sea of Arab enemies was being canceled out by an ever-expanding Soviet capacity in Egypt — which in turn would challenge the

Middle East interests of the United States itself. The United States, seeing nothing but greater crisis in a double spiral of U.S.-Soviet arms flow into the area, maintained its search for a diplomatic solution.

In the middle of April, what Israeli calls the "second phase" of Soviet involvement began—admittedly catching U.S. strategists wholly by surprise: Soviet pilots took off from Egyptian airfields to fly protective covering patterns over the Egyptian heartland.

The Soviet aircraft take to the air whenever Israeli planes approach Egyptian territory. While so far they have remained out of the immediate combat zone over the Suez Canal, they form a protective aerial barrier over Egypt. The challenge they pose is totally blunt — for Israel to confront them in combat means facing the might of the Soviet Union.

On the ground below, Soviet-supplied surface-to-air missiles, both SA-2s and the more advanced SA-3s, plus extensive antiaircraft emplacements, complete the defense screen. Together, all these military components are intended to deny Israel the capacity to strike at Egypt, while Egyptian planes are freed, at least in principle, to hit Israel. At the same time, Israel is exposed to Egyptian ground action, guerrilla attacks and whatever else the surrounding Arabs can throw against it.

The strategic shrewdness of the mixture from an Egyptian-Soviet standpoint is that they can—and do—maintain that Soviet forces and equipment are engaged

On April 23, according to administration sources, a special Middle East group of planners operating through the National Security Council machinery and under the chairmanship of presidential adviser Henry A. Kissinger, began grappling with the United States' side of this dilemma.

This group, in existence since last summer, includes the chief U.S. negotiator in the Arab-Israeli crisis, Assistant Secretary of State Joseph J. Sisco; Central Intelligence Agency Director Richard Helms; Deputy Defense Secretary David Packard; and other officials.

While members of this group insist they have held a continuing watch on the crisis area, their concentration on the Soviet air combat presence coincided with a crisis decision of much greater moment to the administration: the intervention in Cambodia.

While no one will admit it now, immediately after President Nixon's April 30 announcement of the Cambodia operation several ranking officials conceded the Cambodia was pre-empting

all attention at the White House.

The special Middle East group completed its assessments about June 20 for the National Security Council and the President.

Part of the work of this group has appeared in the latest U.S. peace initiative in the Arab-Israeli conflict, publicly acknowledged by Secretary Rogers on June 25. Another portion of its conclusions has emerged in the sudden grim warnings, by President Nixon on July 1 and by other officials, about the "terribly dangerous" risk of an eventual U.S.-Soviet confrontation in the Middle East.

Great public attention and controversy has focused on the warning by an unidentified White House source about the ultimate need to "expel" the Soviet air combat capacity from Egypt before it can become permanently implanted as a springboard for Soviet domination of the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

There is regret in the Administration about the un-diplomatic use of the harsh term "expel"—primarily because it erroneously implies a decision already has been

reached for some form of U.S. intervention to remove the Soviet air combat presence, informed sources report.

Instead, authoritative sources say, the objective was to "reinforce," and not to supplant, the administration's drive to try to solve the Arab-Israeli crisis by diplomatic means before it spirals out of reach of a diplomatic solution. The United States was compelled, these sources say, to make the Soviet Union face the "realities" of the situation.

What the Nixon administration has been determined to correct, these sources say, is the danger of a major Soviet miscalculation that the United States will accept Soviet actions in the Middle East. The Soviet Union must be convinced, it is said, that the United States will not permit the Kremlin, in effect, to "slide to the sidelines" of the crisis, as though it were no party to the long-range strategic consequences that can flow from it.

"I think we got the Soviet's attention," said one administration source yesterday.